

Building Alliances to Address Sexual and Gender-based Violence

It is now widely accepted that effective strategies to end sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) must engage with men and boys. In practice, however, the relationship between traditional women's rights movements and organisations working on engaging men and boys is an uneasy one. There is a necessity to understand these tensions between women's movements and work with men. We must address feminist concerns about the exclusion of women's rights, moving away from the 'men as protectors' approach and take seriously concerns of lack of funding in specific areas. Alongside this, exploring opportunities for learning across movements will be integral to building better alliances in the future.

Key tensions between women's movements and work with men

The growing recognition of the importance of engaging men and boys in strategies to address sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) has been motivated by a push towards primary prevention and a desire to address men's role as perpetrators of violence, as well as by increasing understanding that patriarchal norms that construct harmful masculinities are implicated in fuelling this violence. Both men and women are recognised as being negatively affected by patriarchal inequality and so must both be a part of the response. This approach is not only consistent with evidence from IDS, and our global partners, but also through the work of other activists, advocates and researchers on these issues.

Such thinking forms part of transformative approaches which involve men and women working together in order to change gender roles and create more respectful and egalitarian relationships. As an activist in India outlined, there needs to be space for men and women to 'talk to each other and hold each other accountable for

gender equality.' Movements, such as Sonke Gender Justice in South Africa, adopt this thinking in their work, as they do not identify as a men's movement, but a gender justice movement that works for the rights of women and men to live free from violence and inequality. In spite of this acknowledgement, along with the presence of gender equality and civil society organisations that engage men, tensions often exist between traditional women's rights movements and organisations and networks engaging men and boys to address SGBV.

Excluding feminist concerns about women's rights

In work with men and boys, it is often perceived by the women's rights movements, and feminist scholars, that there is the risk that feminist concerns about women's rights will be quietly moved to the periphery of the policy agenda. Particularly within the field of SGBV, the fear is that an unintended consequence of the emphasis on working with men and boys to change their gender attitudes and practices could be that women's empowerment and violence prevention work with women would receive insufficient attention. Recent case studies in India,

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Kenya and South Africa reveal these tensions and scepticism of the possible role that men can play in addressing SGBV, but it is important to stress that these approaches to work with men documented with IDS take a clear pro-feminist stance.

In South Africa, activists and practitioners working in traditional women's rights organisations highlighted the critical work they are doing with women on the violence and abuse that men perpetrate against them. They argued that this work is fundamental to the security of women, and it is therefore not only their responsibility to work with men.

These tensions may result, as in the case of Kenya, in a hostile attitude towards men's engagement, which is at times perceived as promoting 'men's rights', often at the expense of women's, although the groups involved in Kenya clearly distance themselves from such 'men's rights' groups. Similar experiences are shared by Men's Action to Stop Violence Against Women (MASVAW) activists in the India case study; accounts of suspicion from some women's organisations 'that may think that groups like MASVAW are not legitimate,' or are working towards 'a protectionist as opposed to a transformative approach.' These negative perceptions about men's involvement in movements to champion gender equality can be seen as a major hindrance to men's engagement in the fight against SGBV.

Men as protectors

A second concern relates to particular strategies for engaging with men and boys that find entry points through conservative, traditional and religious values, for example promoting the role of man as protector. Country case studies in Sierra Leone and South Africa reveal that this emphasis on men protecting 'their' women is centred on a philosophy which presents women as deserving protection because they are sisters, wives, and mothers, and not as human beings. This ideology, which presents women as in need of male protection, diminishes women's agency by placing them in a space that they need to be rescued from.

Findings from Sierra Leone suggest that while men should, and do, play an active role in advocating for women's human rights,

this is often premised under the context that women did not have the sufficient power or agency to advocate for these rights in customary courts, or in their interpersonal relationships; and conversely, it followed a logic that men had power that could be used to harm, or to protect, women. Whilst many of the groups involved recognise these tensions but appeal to men to use their position of privilege more responsibly, for women's rights organisations in South Africa, these strategies are seen as contributing to the maintenance of patriarchy. Case studies from India and Kenya show how organisations and networks mobilising men around gender justice, reject the 'male as protector' approach, instead taking up a critique of patriarchy as unjust and harmful to women, as well as to men and children.

Funding and resource allocation

As there is limited funding for organisations working to provide resources to people affected by SGBV, this adds to the tensions in relation to engaging men in addressing SGBV. The African Population and Health Research Centre (APHRC), IDS and Men for Gender Equality Now (MEGEN) highlight that since 2000 there has been a depletion in resources to civil society organisations supporting women's rights issues. There is a concern that within this landscape of limited funds, organisations focused on bringing men into the discussion are taking away funding and attention from more traditional women's rights movement. As Srilatha Batliwala writes, these organisations have historically played a huge role in highlighting the role of patriarchal masculinities in perpetuating gender discrimination and violence, and calling for men to become allies, but are now struggling with a decline in funding for transformative strategies.

MASVAW activists in India shared the fear raised by women's groups that men's groups may try to divert the resources that are available for the women's organisations and that 'in the patriarchal structure, will not these men's groups try to use this network for their own profit; won't they start working towards the men's benefit.' Furthermore, a related fear was whether this might 'contribute to the depletion of the work with women.' Evidence from Kenya shows that men's organisations are often perceived

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as competitors to women's organisations, suggesting that men's groups are seen to be 'in it to capitalise on women's resources'.

How have men and women's movements addressed these tensions?

Moving beyond the 'mothers-wives-sisters-daughters' narrative

In Egypt, while interventions on SGBV have been led and implemented by women, due to it being strongly associated with 'women's issues' and often tackled as women's problem, the presence of men as founders, leaders and members of youth-led informal initiatives such as Shoft Taharosh, Bassma and Opantish has changed the face of gender activism in the country. One effective approach to challenge dominant perspectives of masculinities and change the image of what it is to be a man has been to encourage men to think about and understand SGBV from their own perspectives. Hence, without directly talking about women's rights, by using notions of humanity and fairness, a new narrative is put forward. As a result of these initiatives, there have been significant changes. Women are claiming public spaces to which they were previously denied access, men and women are united in working together towards common goals in tackling lax security which leads to increased assaults, a wave of citizen activism sweeping the country in an unprecedented manner, and increased engagement through demonstrations, protests and strikes.

In Uganda, the importance of solidarities around principles of equity and inclusion are highlighted by the experience of isolation by male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. These survivors are mobilising to build peer support groups. These groups are comparatively new, few and far-between for male refugees in the Ugandan context and there is not large-scale organising such as that developed by women over many years to address SGBV. Whilst focused on highlighting the hidden experiences and plight of male victims of sexual violence, the groups are increasingly engaging with their female partners and other support organisations serving the needs of refugees under an equal human rights framing. This also steers away from the narrow framing that presents victimhood as essentially female and thus

women as essentially vulnerable rather than having agency.

Men's groups working in solidarity with women and for women's rights agenda

Across the different institutions and levels of the MASVAW movement in India, women and men are constructing alliances, from interpersonal to institutional. MASVAW identifies as a pro-feminist movement, and has established formal relationships with a number of women's organisations that work to support women survivors of violence, including legal, medical, social mediation and other services. MASVAW works with these organisations both at the level of referral in cases of violence, documentation of cases and also on strategies for primary prevention (such as community sensitisation and participatory education where each partner organisation works with men and women respectively to ensure that support and understanding is appropriate to their context) or secondary prevention, through mediation and negotiation in cases of separation or reconciliation.

Allies in the feminist movement are strong partners and have contributed to major gains in knowledge and influence, where those partnerships have been robust. The relationships with women's organisations have been highlighted as integral for MASVAW, including in the founding of the campaign, in order to learn across gendered perspectives, experiences and ideas. Activists argued that, where meaningful partnerships are built, working with women's rights organisations and feminist groups can strengthen the accountability of the campaign and the transformative potentials of the activism. MASVAW activists highlighted how they envisage their alliances and partnerships with women's organisations as transformative in that they aim to recognise and promote women's positions of leadership. MASVAW is working with men and women within a village to support women's representation within the Panchayat and within academic institutions to support women's equal participation in decision-making on gender issues. The MASVAW activists expressed how the representation of women within their partnerships must support new ways of interacting, so that they reflect the dynamics and egalitarian relationships that they are trying to achieve in wider contexts.

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Policy recommendations

Stay accountable to the goal of transformative change

Work which engages men and boys can remain accountable to work by women's rights movements on SGBV specifically, and gender justice more generally by:

- Acknowledging the huge role that women's rights movements have already played in highlighting and responding to issues of SGBV.
- Holding men to account for the privilege and power they enjoy and wield in relation to other men and women. This can be done by encouraging men to be actively involved and committed to redistributing power and privilege by constantly questioning more pervasive and ingrained structural inequalities.
- Ensuring that such initiatives which advocate for gender transformation, but in fact quietly maintain normative gender roles that situate women lower than men within the organisation's hierarchy, challenge and question these norms internally.
- Encouraging organisations working on engaging men and boys to look internally at women's leadership in the programmes and campaigns that men are a part of.
- Making sure that women's leadership and voices remain central to work addressing SGBV and achieving gender justice.

Promote alliances between movements

Meaningful collaboration, dialogue and mutual learning will contribute to the dynamism, reach and depth of the network and can be achieved by:

- Working with men and women, boys and girls, and marginalised gender identities across the various intersecting issues that influence their lives and opportunities. This would require a better understanding of how an intersectional approach can highlight the ways in which privilege and discrimination manifests.
- Envisaging alliances between women's and men's groupings as partnerships, where organisations working with men and boys engage in dialogue and conversations with women's rights movements.
- Ensuring that efforts to engage men and boys are developed and implemented in ongoing consultation with groups working to promote and protect women's rights. This might include, for instance, involving women's rights organisations in strategic planning processes. In this way programmes that involve men and boys can be seen not as a substitute to work with women's and girls' rights, but as complementary.
- Getting activists and practitioners to actively commit to challenging rigid leadership structures and negative power dynamics through the recognition of and support for women's leadership within men's movements.

Move away from the 'men as protector' narrative

Organisations and networks that work with men can enable change towards gender equality that works towards transformative change for men and women by:

- Addressing women's status so that women are seen as autonomous human beings and not the property of men.
- Highlighting how men themselves are affected and exposed to SGBV as a way to break the normalised images of masculinity.

Take seriously the concerns of drains on resources for women's rights

Activists and organisations working with men and boys should:

- Make sure they advocate for funding and recognition for SGBV, and gender equality work more broadly, not just for work to engage men and boys specifically. This should be done in cooperation with women's rights movements.



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Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE UK

T +44 (0) 1273 606261 F + 44 (0) 1273 621202 E ids@ids.ac.uk W www.ids.ac.uk

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Further reading

Batliwala, S. (2014) 'Carving a Space: Reflections on the 2nd MenEngage Symposium', *The Association for Women's Rights in Development*, AIWID News & Analysis blog

Ricardo, C. (2015) *Men, Masculinities, and Changing Power: A Discussion Paper on Engaging Men in Gender Equality from Beijing 1995 to 2015*, Men Engage Alliance

Shahrokh, T. with Edström, J. (2015) 'Sexual and Gender-based Violence', in J. Edström, A. Hassink, T. Shahrokh and E. Stern (eds), *Engendering Men: A Collaborative Review of Evidence on Men and Boys in Social Change and Gender Equality*, EMERGE Evidence Review, Promundo-US, Sonke Gender Justice and Institute of Development Studies, Brighton: IDS

Case studies from Egypt, India, Kenya, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Uganda on collective action and engaging men and boys to address sexual and gender-based violence can be read on Interactions: <http://interactions.eldis.org/gender-based-violence>

Credits

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